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THE ORIGINS OF CHEAP NATURE: FROM USE-VALUE TO ABSTRACT SOCIAL NATURE

GENERICSCIENCE ABSTRACT NATURE, CAPITALISM, CAPITALOCENE, NON-ECOLOGY

Modernity's law of value is an exceedingly peculiar way of organizing life in a civilization. Born in the midst of the rise of capitalism after 1450, the law of value enabled an unprecedented historical transition: from land productivity to labor productivity as the metric of wealth and power. It was an ingenious civilizational strategy, for it enabled the deployment of capitalist *technics* – crystallizations of tools and ideas, power and nature – to appropriate the wealth of uncommodified nature in service to advance labor productivity within the zone of commodification. The great leap forward in the scale, scope, and speed of landscape and biological transformations in the three centuries after 1450 – stretching from Poland to Brazil, and the North Atlantic's cod fisheries to Southeast Asia's spice islands – may be understood in this light (see Moore, "The Capitalocene, Part I"; also Moore, 2007; 2010a; 2010b; 2013a; 2013b).

Such transformations were the epoch-making expressions of a new law of value that reconfigured uncommodified human and extra-human natures (slaves, forests, soils) in servitude to labor productivity and the commodity. The new law of value was quite spectacular. Never before had any civilization negotiated this transition from land productivity to labor productivity as the decisive metric of wealth. This strange metric – value – oriented the whole of west-central Europe towards an equally strange conquest of space. This strange conquest was what Marx (1973, 524) calls the "annihilation of space by time," and across the long sixteenth century we can see a new form of time – abstract time – taking shape (Landes, 1983). While all civilizations in some sense are built to expand across varied topographies, none represented these topographies as external and progressively abstracted in the ways that dominated early capitalism's geographical praxis. The genius of capitalism's cheap nature strategy was to represent time as linear, space as flat, and nature as external (Mumford, 1934; Merchant, 1980; Pickles, 2004). It was a civilizational inflection of the "God-trick" (Haraway, 1988), with bourgeois knowledge representing its special brand of quantifying and scientific reason as a mirror of the world – the same world then being reshaped by early modernity's scientific revolutions in alliance with empires and capitals. The God-trick was the work of abstract social nature.

With abstract time, in other words, would come abstract space (Lefebvre, 1991). Together, they were the indispensable corollaries to the weird crystallization of human and extra-human natures in the form of abstract social labor. It was this ascendant law of value – operating as gravitational field rather than mechanism—that underpinned the extraordinary landscape and biological

revolutions of early modernity. Notwithstanding the fanciful historical interpretations of the Anthropocene argument and its idealized model of a two-century modernity (Steffen et al., 2011), the origins of capitalism's cheap nature strategy and today's biospheric turbulence are to be found in the long sixteenth century. The issue is not one of anthropogenic-drivers — presuming a fictitious human unity — but of the relations of capital and capitalist power. The issue is not the Anthropocene, but the *Capitalocene*.

The "Age of Capital" has been premised on a relation that enables advancing labor productivity in great bursts with even greater bursts in the production of "cheap natures," above the Four Cheaps of labor-power, food, energy, and raw materials (Moore, 2012). The catch is that capital-labor relations are not well-equipped to map, code, survey, quantify and otherwise identify and facilitate *new* sources of cheap nature. This latter has, crucially, involved all manner of knowledge-practices, closely linked but not reducible to territorial power (Parenti, 2014), in which the expanded reproduction of the capital-unpaid work relation has been central. This is the historical terrain of abstract social nature and accumulation by appropriation.

The idea of nature as external has worked so effectively because the condition for capital's "self"-expansion is the location and production of external natures. (An obviously co-productive process.) Because these natures are historical and therefore finite, the exhaustion of one historical nature quickly prompts the "discovery" of new natures that deliver yet untapped sources of unpaid work. Thus did the Kew Gardens of British hegemony yield to the International Agricultural Research Centers of American hegemony, which in turn were superseded by the bioprospecting, rent-seeking, and genomic mapping practices of the neoliberal era (Brockway, 1978; Kloppenborg, 1988; McAfee, 1999; 2003). This means that not only is capitalism bound up with a historically-specific nature; so are its specific phases of development. Each long century of accumulation does not "tap" an external nature that exists as a warehouse of resources. Rather, each such long wave creates — and is created by — a historical nature that offers a new, specific set of constraints and opportunities. The accumulation strategies that work at the beginning of a cycle — creating particular historical natures through science, technology, and new forms of territoriality and governance (abstract social nature)—progressively exhaust the relations of reproduction that supply "cheap" labor, food, energy, and raw materials. At some point, this exhaustion registers in rising commodity prices.

This view of nature as external object, while demonstrably false in terms of historical method, was an essential moment in the rise of capitalism. Here we can see ideas as "material force" (Marx, 1978, 60). Early capitalism's world-praxis, fusing symbolic coding and material inscription, moved forward an audacious fetishization of nature. This was expressed, dramatically, in the era's cartographic, scientific, and quantifying revolutions. These were the symbolic moments of primitive accumulation, creating a new intellectual system whose presumption, personified by Descartes, was the separation of humans from the rest of nature. For early modern materialism, the point was not only to interpret the world but to control it: "to make ourselves as it were the masters and possessors of nature" (Descartes, 2006, 51). It was a powerful vision, one so powerful that that even today, many students of global environmental change have internalized the early modern view of nature as effectively external to human activity (e.g., Steffen et al., 2011).

The origins of cheap nature are, of course, far more than intellectual and symbolic. The transgression of medieval intellectual frontiers was paired with the transgression of medieval territoriality. While civilizational expansion is in some sense fundamental to all, there emerged in early modern Europe a specific geographical thrust. While all civilizations had frontiers of a sort, capitalism was a frontier. The extension of capitalist power to new spaces that were uncommodified became the lifeblood of capitalism. I have elsewhere considered the historical geographies of early capitalism's commodity frontiers (Moore, 2000b, 2003a, 2003b, 2009, 2010a, 2010b, 2010d, 2010e). For the moment, I wish to highlight two relational axes of these frontiers. First, commodity frontier movements were not merely about the extension of commodity relations, although this was indeed central. Commodity frontier movements were also, crucially, about the extension of territorial and symbolic forms that appropriated unpaid work in service to commodity production. This unpaid work could be delivered by humans — women or slaves, for example — or by extra-human natures, such as forests, soils, or rivers. Second, such frontier movements were, from the very beginning of capitalism, essential to creating the forms of cheap nature specific to capitalism, the Four Cheaps.

What are the implications of this line of thought for a post-Cartesian historical method, one that takes the law of value as a co-production of humans bundled with the rest of nature?

An approach to value that joins the appropriation of cheap natures (including humans!) and the exploitation of commodified labor-power allows us to unravel some of the mysteries of early capitalism's dynamism — a civilization with few significant resource or technological advantages and yet endowed with an epoch-making capacity to reshape landscapes worldwide. While *marxisante* ecology tends to ignore value (e.g. Foster, Clark, and York, 2010), it does so by hiding from view Marx's formulation that use- and exchange-value represent "*on the surface*" the "internal opposition of use-value and value" (Marx, 1977: 153, 209). Marx's discussion in these opening pages of *Capital* are pitched at so high a level of abstraction that I think the implications of this "internal opposition" have been insufficiently grasped. These implications are explosive. For to say that value and use-value are *internally related* is to say that the value relation encompasses the relation value/use-value in a way that necessarily extends far beyond the immediate process of production. Here is a connection that allows us to join definite "modes of production" and definite "modes of life" in concrete historical unities (quotations from Marx and Engels, 1970: 42).

This means that capitalism can be comprehended through the shifting configuration of the exploitation of labor-power and the

appropriation of cheap natures – a dialectic of paid and unpaid work that demands a disproportional expansion of the latter (appropriation) in relation to the former (exploitation). This reality is suggested – even if its implications for accumulation are only partially grasped – by those widely-cited estimates on the contribution of unpaid work performed by humans (UNDP, 1995: 16; Safri and Graham, 2010) and the rest of nature (“ecosystem services”) (Costanza, et al., 1997). The quantitative reckonings for unpaid human work – overwhelmingly delivered by women – vary between 70 and 80 percent of world GDP; for “ecosystem services,” between 70 and 250 percent of GDP. The relations between these two moments are rarely grasped (but see Perkins, 2007); their role in long waves of accumulation, rarely discussed (but for unpaid human work, see Caffentzis, 2010/1980; O’Hara, 1995). I would observe that unpaid work comprises not only the active and ongoing contributions to the daily reproduction of labor-power and the production cycles of agriculture and forestry. Unpaid work also encompasses the appropriation of *accumulated* unpaid work in the form of children raised to adulthood largely outside the commodity system (e.g., in peasant agriculture) and subsequently pushed or pulled into wage-work, and also in the form of fossil fuels produced through the earth’s biogeological processes.

The appropriation of unpaid work signifies something beyond the important – but nevertheless too partial – notion of environmental costs and externalities as “missing” (e.g. Patel, 2009). I think in this respect that we may take the crucial insight from feminist marxism: the contribution of unpaid work is not “just there,” but actively produced through complex (yet patterned) relations of power, (re)production, and accumulation. I risk pedantry here in saying that the “free gifts” of nature are not “low-hanging fruit” that can simply be picked without much time and effort. Quite the contrary! Cheap natures are actively produced by human activity bundled with the rest of nature, and human and extra-human natures are *both* replete with creativity and contingency. Nature is too often regards as a passive substrate – as in the popular ecological footprint metaphor (Wackernagel and Rees, 1996) – but this is a modernist conceit; one that reflects capital’s priorities rather more the history of capitalism. But nature is not substrate; it is the field within which all life unfolds. And all of that life is actively, creatively, incessantly engaged in environment-making (Levins and Lewontin, 1985; Moore, 2013a) – such that, in the modern world, human ingenuity (such as it is) and human activity (such as it has been) must *activate* the work of particular natures in order to appropriate particular streams of unpaid work. Such activation is co-produced reality, bundling the life-activities of human and extra-human nature, present and accumulated over time.

What are the implications for a historically grounded theory of value? On the one hand, capitalism lives and dies on the expanded reproduction of capital: value-in-motion. The substance of value is abstract social labor, or socially necessary labor time, implicated in the production of surplus value. On the other hand, this production of value is particular – it does not value everything, only labor power in the service of commodity production – and therefore rests upon a series of devaluations. Plenty of work – indeed the majority of work in the orbit of capitalism – does not register as valuable. Work by humans, especially women; but also “work” performed by extra-human natures. For good reason does Hribal pose the question (2003), “Are animals part of the working class”? – a question that illuminates the law of value’s absurdity alongside its consistent praxis. Although there remains a lot of confusion about this, it is now clear that Marx understood that extra-human natures perform all sorts of useful (but not valuable) work for capitalist production, and that such useful work was in fact *immanent* to the capital-relation (Burkett, 1999). Marx’s reading of value was, in other words, eminently post-Cartesian.

REFERENCES (TO BE ADDED, see also: “The Capitalocene, Part II: Abstract Social Nature and the Limits to Capital,” for references).

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